

U.S. Program Encourages Foreign Female Students to Dream Big

BY ANGELA CHEN

WASHINGTON
ENKHBAYAR, a Mongolian student from a family of sheepherders, is quite literally disappointed by the White House. “This is it?” she asks. “It’s so small,” she says, compared with the grand mansions on American soap operas she grew up watching. But while the president’s home hasn’t lived up to her expectations, the impact of the program that brought her here, she says, has been huge: “I started to dream about very big things.”



Enkhbayar is one of 20 female students who were here this summer for the inaugural Global Women’s Leadership Institute, part of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Women in Public Service project. With a grant from the State Department (which requested that *The Chronicle* use only the participants’ first names), Saint Mary’s College, a women’s institution in Notre Dame, Ind., played host to participants from Egypt, Libya, Mongolia, Myanmar, and Tunisia.

The young women stayed in dormitories with Saint Mary’s students, spent a month in women’s-history classes at the college’s Center for Women’s Intercultural Leadership, and then took a trip to the East Coast, culminating in a visit to Washington.



Hager (middle), from Tunisia, and Enkhbayar (right), from Mongolia, visit Washington with Ambreen Ahman (left), a student at Saint Mary’s College, in Indiana, which hosted 20 foreign women for a leadership institute this summer.

Between classes and sightseeing, Enkhbayar, who is 21, says she developed a new self-awareness. She grew up in Mongolia’s capital city of Ulan Bator, where her family resettled after a particularly hard winter killed its livestock.

Life was about home, school, and church: the same route every day, she says. She planned to graduate from university, get married, and work in human resources.

But the leadership institute has left Enkhbayar, who also goes by Amy, determined to do something to shape the future of Mongolia, which is still transitioning to democracy after 70 years of Communist rule. She has been thinking a lot about the social and economic gap between city dwellers and those dubbed “countryside people.” And when she returns to the National University of Mongolia, she plans to start a program to help rural students learn the urban way of life.

“These students, raised herding sheep, don’t know negotiation skills,” she says. “So if they find a job, it’s really lower-class, even if their skill and knowledge is better than those so-called city people.”

Enkhbayar has long been aware of those inequalities, but she didn’t think she could do anything about them. On the first day of the women’s-leadership institute, the participants were asked to write down what they wanted to do with their lives. Enkhbayar was shocked by the question, she says: It was too big, too hard to answer.

On the last day, in response to the same question, her answer came easily. Beyond the program for rural students, she wants to host a forum for female students at her university. And she now hopes to go on to work for a women’s-rights organization—and help start important public conversations in Mongolia. The new goals, she says, smiling, are “a really big change.”

ARAB SPRING, GLOBAL WARMING

Hager, a recent graduate of Monastir Pharmacy School, in Tunisia, was already interested in women’s issues. But she didn’t know how to be an activist, she says.

The leadership institute helped her realize that the first step is to create a place for women to hold discussions, she says, and set their own agendas. When she returns to Tunis, Hager plans to host a women’s conference. Dialogue is crucial right

now, she says, as a new constitution is being written.

“Women’s rights and equal opportunities for women are very important to advocate for during this time in Tunisia,” Hager says.

During the leadership institute, participants had to explain the political situations in their home countries. The accounts of Egyptian and Libyan participants, Hager says, helped her understand the full extent of the Arab Spring. Speaking to fellow Tunisians made her question her own assumptions.

“Some girls didn’t really know” about the Arab Spring, she says, “so I had to explain some things.” Other Tunisian women joined in. “Sometimes we didn’t see the same facts the same way,” Hager says. “It made me realize how different people within the same country could have such different opinions.”

Differing perspectives within a country were also a lesson for Ambreen Ahmad, a Saint Mary’s student who served as a mentor to both Enkhbayar and Hager. Ms. Ahmad, from Dixon, Ill., is now a senior and plans to go on to graduate school for public administration.

During the institute, she went to classes with the international students, but some of the most interesting discussions, she says, happened back in the dorms.

For instance, Hager once asked why Americans don’t believe in global warming, says Ms. Ahmad, who was troubled by the question. “There is usually a dominant ideology of the United States that permeates across the world, and it’s not necessarily reflected by what I think, and what other Americans think,” she says, recalling her response to Hager.

“It’s important that different views are respected,” Ms. Ahmad says now. “There’s not one view that speaks for everyone.”

Based on the global-warming discussion, she developed an “action plan,” a requirement of all 10 mentors at Saint Mary’s this summer. Like Hager and Enkhbayar, Ms. Ahmad will start close to home. This fall on campus, she will work to promote voter registration.



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